

Powers of Illusion



home

Without seeing the magnificence of the royal palace, one can never sense the dignity of the emperor."

- from a poem of the Tang Dynasty

Based on their native political history and traditions, Westerners tend to associate power with an outward or expansive movement, exemplified by exploration and conquest. For this reason they often find themselves deeply perplexed by ancient Chinese Imperial power, which seems to exhibit a very different, even opposing tendency.

The most monumental illustration of this introverted Chinese tradition is the Great Wall. Built over centuries as a defensive barrier against the fierce Steppe nomads threatening China from the north and west, the Wall not only functioned to keep invaders out, but also -- as with all protective measures -- served to isolate those it encircled. The Great Wall, however, was only the outermost ring of a huge concentric system of power, one that operated with remarkable consistency of principle throughout the Middle Kingdom.

From the heart of the Imperial capital to the boundaries of the Empire, and beyond, the Chinese Emperor wielded power and influence unmatched by any Western sovereign since the decline of the Roman Empire. Yet, in China's case, the projection of power seems to have been eclipsed by impenetrability, withdrawal, even disappearance. How was it possible for this strategy of reclusive contraction to establish and maintain effective authority over such vastly extensive domains? This is the central mystery of Imperial China, at least as far as foreign visitors are concerned.

Nowhere is this puzzle more starkly and intriguingly posed than in Beijing's Palace Museum, the old "Forbidden City", so-called because it was completely sealed-off -- from the city outside, from the rest of society and from the wider world -- for 500 years.

Faced with a continuing Mongol menace to the north, third Ming Emperor, Yongle (Zhudi) moved the Imperial Capital from Nanjing to Beijing and immediately began building the Forbidden City, which was constructed between 1407-1420. The work was said to have required a million labourers, including at least one hundred thousand skilled artisans. The architectural design has an obsessive, even paranoid character, cocooning the Imperial court in layer after layer of protection.

In order to fully appreciate this stupendous site the visitor should start at Tiananmen (the Gate of Heavenly Peace) in the south. From there one heads due north, through Wumen (the Meridian Gate, where the ticket-office to the modern Palace Museum is located) and onward into the Forbidden City. This is the route that all visitors to the Imperial Court took in ancient times.

One passes next over the Inner Golden Water Bridge to Taihemen (the Gate of Supreme Harmony), which in turn leads on to Taihedian (the Hall of Supreme Harmony). Taihedian, also known as Jinluandian (the Hall of the Imperial Throne), is the tallest structure in the Forbidden City and the largest wooden hall to be found anywhere in China. It is the first of the three main buildings of the Outer Palace, and is as far as an ambassador to the Imperial Court would have been allowed to proceed.

Continuing north into the Outer Palace, one next arrives at Zhonghedian (the Hall of Central Harmony), followed by Baohedian (the Hall of Preserving Harmony). Baohedian is the inner- or northern-most edifice of the Outer Palace, and is as far as a visiting monarch would have been admitted.

Qiangqingmen (the Gate of Heavenly Purity) marks the main entrance to the Inner Palace, barred in ancient times even to the loftiest visitor. Today, it is as far as Starbucks, the only multinational corporation to have penetrated the Forbidden City, has been permitted to venture.

Continuing further north, into the Inner Palace, one now passes successively through the three main halls, Qiangqinggong (the Hall of Heavenly Purity), Jiaotaidian (the Hall of Prosperity) and Kunninggong (the Hall of Terrestrial Peace). Finally, passing through the Kunningmen (the Gate of Terrestrial Peace), the by now thoroughly exhausted tourist arrives at the Imperial Gardens and Qinandian (the Hall of Imperial Peace) which lies within.

To the north of the Imperial Gardens lies Shenwumen (the Northern Gate), which serves today both as an exit and alternative entrance. Yet to enter through the Imperial Gardens, from this side, is to miss the magical key to the entire site.

Despite the fact that the Imperial City was built as a home for the Emperor, the guiding strategy of its design was to impress - more precisely, to intimidate - those approaching it from without, whether Imperial subjects or foreign visitors. Each "barrier" served as a theatrical display, in a perpetual performance whose only content was the remote grandeur of the Emperor.

The architecture of the Forbidden City is relentlessly turned outwards in an ingenious spectacle of withdrawal. The secret does not lie in what is hidden, but rather in the dramatic exhibition of its concealment. When one finally arrives at the Inner Palace itself, where the Emperor actually lived, along with his wives, concubines and children, it is the comparative modesty and intimacy of scale that is most striking. One feels like an intruder in a "back-stage" area, where the actors and actresses rest between shows, the great illusion momentarily left aside.

Western visitors are reminded of The Wizard of Oz, and the edict: "Do not look behind the curtain." The comparison becomes even more tempting after learning that the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) did in fact reign from behind a curtain during the penultimate scenes of the Qing regime.

Confronted with these palaces of illusionism a new question arises: Was Imperial China conceived as an immense magic show?

Although the world of magic is commonly associated with the "occult" and the "hermetic", with hidden things, when the magician hides something, it is always by showing something else.

It was precisely because the Forbidden City was designed to hide the centre of power that it makes no secret of its magical ambitions. It was constructed in rigorous accordance with the principles of feng shui (Chinese geomancy), laying out all buildings on a dominant north-south axis, establishing a large-scale geometrical pattern which -- even today -- dominates the whole of Beijing. The halls and palaces are adorned with mystical animals, imperial phoenixes and lions, clawed turtles symbolizing ancient sorcerous wisdom, cranes symbolizing longevity and countless dragons - paired with phoenixes, playing with pearls and protecting doorways. These legions of mysterious creatures offer themselves as the guards and guides of secret realms and significances.

Above all, it is through shushu (the ancient Chinese "art of numbers" or "occult science") that the magical underpinnings of the Forbidden City still speak.

The magical number of imperial power was nine, the highest decimal numeral, whose numerological and arithmetical features Yongle exploited to the full. The Forbidden City consists of 9,999 rooms, its gates are studded in multiples of nine,

the towers guarding it each have nine beams and 18 columns. Yongle even built an artificial mountain in the Imperial Garden, Diuxiushan (the Hill of Accumulated Refinement) topped by Yujingting (the Imperial Viewing Pavilion), dedicated to the Chongyang festival, held on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. His magical obsession with the number nine reaches its zenith in the circular alter of the Tian Tan (the nearby Temple of Heaven), which consists of nine concentric circles of stone slabs, each in multiples of nine, from nine to 81.

Ming Emperor Qianlong followed in these numerological footsteps, erecting the magnificent Nine-Dragon Wall in front of the eastern Huangjimen (the Gate of Ultimate Greatness).

Modern tourists may be tempted to dismiss the magical features of the Forbidden City as mere eccentricities, attesting to the decadence of a ruling elite whose inwardness had detached it from all practical considerations. After all, did Imperial China not fail to exploit the invention of gunpowder for military purposes, blinded by its potential for spectacular effects? Yet, such condescension risks being blinded in turn, missing a crucial lesson of Chinese Imperial history. Magical spectacle may deal in illusions, but illusions can serve as the currency of power.